

AN EMPIRE ON THE BRINK...

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(Originally conceived and produced as an Introduction to Daniel, chapter 5)

Daniel 5 relates the sad last days of the Neo-Babylonian Empire following the death of the great Nebuchadnezzar, which had occurred only some 23 years earlier, and it provides us with some invaluable geo-political insights into the workings of a sovereign God in these present “Times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24).

Job 12:23-25: *He makes nations great, and He destroys them; He enlarges nations, and leads them away. He takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth and makes them wander in a trackless waste. They grope in the dark without light, and He makes them stagger like a drunken man.*

Distinguished British military officer **Sir John Glubb** (1897-1986) once wrote a brief but memorable treatise entitled ***The Fate of Empires*** (1978) in which he attempts to lay out a generic pattern which characterizes the general life-story of the world’s great empires, following the cyclical pattern of their typical rise and fall. As a career military man who personally participated as an eye-witness to the great events that typified the rise and

fall of the British Empire, Glubb was perhaps in an enviable position to author such a study.

Analyzing the histories of eleven selected empires, Glubb concluded that the average lifespan of a great empire is approximately 10 generations, or 250 years (about the current age of the United States—but notably longer than the 87 years of the Neo-Babylonian Empire). In any event, all worldly empires are mortal and eventually collapse—which we might note is in full harmony with the message of Daniel 2 and its account of Nebuchadnezzar's *Dream of the Great Colossus!*

Glubb further observes that empires typically pass through a generic life-cycle, or generally predictable series of stages (some of which run concurrent with one another). These stages, or typical pattern of imperial trajectory, include the following:

- 1) *The Age of Pioneers* (or “Outburst” Stage).
- 2) *The Age of Conquests*.
- 3) *The Age of Commerce*.
- 4) *The Age of Affluence*.
- 5) *The Age of Intellect*.
- 6) *The Age of Decadence*.
- 7) *The Age of Decline & Collapse*.

The general life story of an empire begins with an obscure and underprivileged, but nonetheless hardy band of founding pioneers (**Stage 1**), who are strengthened by great personal hardship, and who thus achieve key victories over a better-situated and established opposition through their personal bravery and relentless innovation. Eventually overwhelming the opposition and appropriating both their superior technology and assets, the rising nation goes on to conquer and expand, forging a great and vast empire (**Stage 2**).

Vast conquests and a great patriotic vision go hand-in-hand with commercial expansion (**Stage 3**), which leads to the enrichment and prosperity of the empire.

The beginnings of the *Age of Commerce* are splendid: the empire is now rich and spends its resources on great public works and monuments, patronizing the arts and cultural attainment. At the same time, the empire retains its patriotic and martial spirit, promoting manly virtue and civic duty.

But the *Age of Commerce* becomes the *Age of Affluence* (**Stage 4**), in which the attainment of wealth and property becomes the principle societal goal. The love of MONEY (1 Tim. 6:10) eventually overwhelms the public's sense of honor, courage, and duty.

Eventually, both the Empire and its individual citizenry become so obsessed with wealth that they lose the patriotic vision and spirit of personal sacrifice that so remarkably

characterized their founders, and they become more-and-more focused upon a defensive policy of retaining their luxuries at all costs. In such a climate, glory and duty become a thing of the past. Likewise, education becomes less about serving the public good and more about acquiring personal wealth and position.

Military preparedness also begins to evaporate as the people seek to “buy off” perspective foreign rivals, and then go on to contemptuously denounce military service and vigilance as something “unsophisticated” and barbarically “beneath them.”

Somewhat concurrent with this *Stage of Affluence* runs the *Stage of Intellect (Stage 5)*. The new generation seeks affirmation in academic honors and intellectual pretensions. Such an interest indeed leads to *technological advancement*—but also plays a mighty role in continued societal rot and self-absorption, as young people increasingly engage in unending, meaningless academic debates (Acts 17:21). Overly confident in its intellectual ability to solve problems, the society loses its general consensus that such old-fashioned virtues as unselfishness and personal sacrifice are necessary ingredients for the empire’s continued well-being and promotion.

This new spirit of self-interest and rudderless academic pursuits leads to the widening of divisions within the society. Societal cohesion begins to evaporate.

As the empire inevitably advances into its final stages of *Decadence and Decline (Stages 6 & 7)*, Glubb notes that it is characterized by several key aspects:

- a rise in pessimism and ultra-materialism,
- an unbearable and unsustainable influx of foreigners who do not share the cultural vision or values of the society’s original founders,
- the expansion of an Entitlement Culture and the Welfare/Nanny State,
- the weakening of traditional religious concepts and values,
- the rise of a general spirit of frivolity (1 Cor. 15:32), in which athletes & entertainers increasingly become the popular heroes and focus of society’s attention.

In short, decline flows from an idle and self-centered community that has been corrupted by prosperity, and which in its final stages even sees its beloved wealth and culture of luxury begin to wane. As the society’s collective wealth continues to dwindle, so too does its collective sense of optimism and unity.

Ultimately, the empire descends into its death-throes, typically falling into the hands of a more aggressive, rising people.

Writer G. Michael Hopf, in his post-apocalyptic novel *Those Who Remain*, offers a relevant quote that underlines the cyclical nature (Eccl. 1:4-11) of the rise and fall of empires: **“Hard times create strong men, strong men create good times, good times create weak men, and weak men create hard times.”**

Remarkably, Glubb's general thesis seems to universally prevail, despite the differing eras, geographical locations, or cultural climates in which various empires arise. **MAN IS ALWAYS MAN!**

BABYLON had swiftly passed through its appointed stages, and now appears before the reader in Daniel 5 in its final stages of *Decadence* and *Decline*.

Postscript:

Let us now dare pose a question, dear reader!

"What stage has our own beloved United States of America now entered into--at the general age (again, 250 years) when most empires reach the limits of their span?"

In times like these, let God's people LOOK UP (1 Thess. 4:16-18)!!!—and be joyfully and reverently prepared to receive that eternal and Divine Kingdom that will not be created by human hands (Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45), and which represents a radical discontinuity from the sinful and worldly patterns of the present evil age (Gal. 1:4). AMEN!